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ABSTRACT

Beginning reading instruction is a challenge that teachers can meet successfully by using imagination, working hard, displaying enthusiasm, and expressing genuine concern for the young children that they teach. This paper offers guidelines for beginning reading teachers who base their programs on traditional basal readers. The guidelines are summarized as follows: (1) Choose the preprimer with thought for its content and your students. (2) Spend time on prereading activities as you become acquainted with the class. (3) Make your classroom reflect the enjoyment of reading. (4) Teach the vocabulary of the first preprimer before letting children use the book, and use this period to "sort out" the pupils according to reading readiness and ability. (5) Introduce the first preprimer to only those children that have mastered the vocabulary. (6) Finally, make reading a "natural" part of the whole school day, integrating it with other course activities, especially writing. Some specific class reading activities (for groups, pairs, and individuals) are discussed. (RL)

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Beginning Reading

Using A

Traditional Basal Reader

A talk given at the
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BEGINNING READING USING A TRADITIONAL BASAL READER

There are many ways of teaching reading, many successful ways, and no one way has been proven the best. For some children, one approach may be more effective than another; for one teacher, one plan may be best suited to her teaching style. Because my topic concerns the basal reader, it does not mean that I regard this as the best or only way. However, it is the most common plan, so that a look at its use, with suggestions for improvement, is always timely.

First, it seems reasonable to define two of the phrases in my topic. By "beginning reading" I mean the early stages leading into and actually using a preprimer. I am regarding a "traditional basal reader" as one using a controlled vocabulary, beginning with "look-say" words, but with planned teaching of word recognition skills that fit both the reading material and the child learning to read. Those word attack skills would NOT consist of phonics only, but will include the use of context clues and structural analysis as well as clues that originate in the very flow of English itself. Traditionally, readers have been used for group teaching, and although some teachers do a fine job of helping children individually, I must confess that I perform more successfully by using small groups to teach beginning reading to a class. However, this must never mean that individual needs and strengths are ignored. If there can be such a thing as individualizing through small groups, then that is my scheme.

A first task for the teacher is to decide which series of readers she plans to use. Will it be the same beginning set for all children, or a variety? It is not uncommon to have a few children who read quite well upon entering First Grade. While they will be well beyond a first preprimer

stage, they may be interested in class and group compositions because of the mechanical aspect of writing, so will join in that work, but for a different reason. For their development in reading, the teacher must spend time individually with each and use a simple informal reading inventory to determine the teaching level. A variety of trade books will ease the first week or two!

For the majority of the class, the teacher will be concerned with prereading and very early reading activities. She needs to be aware of the readers available and to know something about her class. Since no classroom needs 25 or 30 copies of the same reader, most school boards supply smaller numbers of a variety of series, not just those authorized by the Ministry of Education. If choice is free, try to match the reader with the class. When the children come from single parent families, find a reader that is not based on the affluent suburban family with large back yards, plenty of toys and two parents who take the children everywhere. Ginn 360 highlights children's activities in the park and at school. If the children are predominantly non-white, and live in the inner city, look at the Bank Street readers. When you do not wish to emphasize city life, see the Bookmark program which centers on children and animals. If you teach in a suburban area where children's language skills are advanced, and experiences extensive, introduce them to the Ginn Integrated (or Starting Points in Language Arts, the revised series). Perhaps you wish to begin the term with a unit about the children themselves, their families and their pets. Both the new Gage Expressways Series and the MacMillan Series r provide material for this. As an added attraction, the Expressways set is Canadian, and integrates the language arts.

There are other considerations in choosing a reader. Are the stories

interesting, with a plot? Are they within the child's experience? If you like following the same set of characters throughout the book, then choose a reader that does. If you prefer a smorgasbord with stories, informational material, and pictures to illustrate repeated sentence patterns, look at the the New Open Highways (now Canadianized).

Consider the format. Is it attractive? Do pictures relate to the text? Is the print clear and easy to read? Does the design or picture interfere with the print? Is the size of the book encouraging for a beginning reader?

Examine the vocabulary. How quickly do new words appear? Are they repeated sufficiently? Do the sentences sound like English speech?

Look at the approach used to teach word attack skills. Has there been work done before the preprimer stage? If so, you will need to work this in. Is the child encouraged to get meaning from, and put meaning into, the material? Is there a variety of word recognition skills presented?

Consult the publisher's catalogue to see what extra material might be helpful. Sometimes there are useful photographs (MacMillan r), word cards, and supplementary books like Camera Patterns, the Bank Street Unit Books, MacMillan Series r Solo Books, and Ginn 360 (and 720) Magic Circle set.

I believe the beginning in reading is a most crucial time for developing a liking for reading, and often, indirectly, a liking for school. Rightly or wrongly, for 6 year-olds and their parents, learning to read and entering First Grade are synonymous. Because of this, I feel success with the first preprimer is absolutely essential. It builds a child's self confidence and feeling of worth. It is on this personal conviction that I base my remarks. What I have already said about choosing an appropriate preprimer will help to make the learning experience pleasant and successful. However, if you are forced to use a series you do not admire, there is still much you can

do to make the learning enjoyable.

The stage before using the preprimer is extremely important. I see it as preparation in three ways:

a) developing "readiness" skills such as the realization that ideas can be put into print and understood by others, and that a story has a beginning, middle and ending, an "acquaintance" with the shape of words in manuscript form with a perception of differences and similarities, and a sense of left to right direction.

b) teaching the preprimer vocabulary through child-centered activities. For a long preprimer like Copp Clark's Off to School, it would be realistic to teach about a third of the vocabulary.

c) providing a set of introductory activities which allows the teacher to "sort out" the children so she knows which are ready to read, and which need more time to develop the skills through broader experiences. No child should be given a preprimer before he can read it easily.

The classroom should provide an environment that encourages reading. Only a teacher who believes reading is important can do this. At least some of the wide variety of books should be displayed on stands which allow the front covers to show. When the teacher reads and handles books, the children should sense her delight. In some cases it is important that the children see the teachers read their own books silently and with pleasure. Provide some wordless picture books discussing them with groups or individuals. It is important for youngsters to have a story sense before they read, so they expect a continuity within the story over two or three pages. Of course, reading aloud is one of the best ways to develop this, especially

when you can read as you show the book to the group. There are some little books that almost read themselves, particularly once heard. I am thinking of the kind with repeated sentence patterns, accompanied by photographs or drawings with strong clues like Bill Martin Jr.'s Sounds I Remember, Jenny Taylor's stories and Vera Southgate's First Words.

In the room I would have material that promotes alphabet play. There should be durable cut-out letters of hard rubber or plastic, and letters on cards, flocked or sandpaper. After free play, children may make their own names, match capitals with lower case, and use the letters as sorting names for objects or pictures beginning with the appropriate sound.

The wall charts put up by the teacher are particularly well-suited to matching activities. Have a set of duplicate cards for the days of the week. From it, give the beginner the name of the day's card to match with the correct day from the one set on the wall. In the same way, when a nursery rhyme on the wall is said or sung, have a duplicate strip for 2 or 3 of the lines so a child can find the identical lines on the chart. Simple activities like this develop visual discrimination as well as reinforcing the left to right movement of written language.

Because children can understand and interpret events only in the context of their own experiences, it is important to prepare them for their first book, so they bring meaning to the words. If the preprimer has a family in it, tell them ahead that they will be reading about some of the things this family does. Introduce the "adopted" family through pictures, cut-out figures or puppets, and teach their names. They can become the class's "make believe" family who want to hear about the things they do. If the fictional children are represented by puppets or dolls, they can live right in the classroom. Perhaps the family pet might be chosen as a mascot -

like Mr. Mugs! Be sure the children understand that they will meet the characters in books, but, before that, there are stories to tell and write for them. Children may dramatize happenings for them, or even include the family in the dramatic play.

Some teachers might like the idea of starting with stories about the children themselves, a booklet All About Me. Each child can make a book, some pages run off with "I am", "I can" (and even "I can't), the children orally putting in verbs which the teacher can write. "I like" is useful. The book may go on to tell about the family, the child's favourite room, and a place to play. Some of this recording can be done after painting, playing a game, singing, moving to music and so on. Although the teacher prints in the personal dictated words, the children are learning the sentence pattern with its core words.

The teacher who enjoys using a camera can make it help the early reading. Pictures of activities on the playground, in the classroom or at the neighbourhood park can lead to dictated reports. With care, pictures can be taken to match the new vocabulary to be introduced. When children see themselves on a see-saw or printing with a potato, it is exciting to tell about it, and to dictate one important thing for the teacher to write. These photo books can become an important part of the library.

Whatever you do to introduce the preprimer's words will be influenced by the actual vocabulary of the book. If the first setting is in a park, you may take the class to a nearby park, or even use a part of the playground for a game or lunch-time picnic. Of course, your co-operative stories must never duplicate the events in the reader. Also, you must remember to check the word attack skills being developed in the preprimer and work in similar details. It is a test of the teacher's ingenuity to plan activities which give meaning to the required vocabulary. She is free to reinforce the

words through dramatic play, singing, moving to music, painting, modelling and games. Special attention to the senses will extend oral vocabulary and give richer meaning to written words when children use feely bags, sound boxes, packages for smelling, and experiment by rubbing with crayon the patterns made by varieties of textured materials like corrugated cardboard, or a metal grater. When those children make up their books about themselves and have printed "I can feel a prickly shape" or "I can rub a pattern", the sentences represent rich experiences; the words are symbols for something that actually happened.

The foregoing may seem removed from the original topic, "Beginning reading using the basal reader". But beginning reading must have meaning, so I see no better way to introduce a chosen set of words than through a modified language-experience start. Vocabulary has its roots in actual experience. Only then can it have meaning. However, I do advocate using the preprimer vocabulalary and acquainting one's self with both the word recognition and comprehension skills taught at that level. Use the stories you read to children each day as a better source for developing comprehension skills, since these skills are really language and thinking skills. Bring out attention to details in "The Gingerbread Man", sequence in "The Little Red Hen", humour in "No Roses for Harry", adventure in "The Tale of Peter Rabbit" and distinguishing real and make-believe in Leo Lionni's "Fish is Fish".

While activities are engaged in as related vocabulary is learned, the children live in a classroom where something important to them is going on. Too often, the doldrums characterize a class where a large portion of the day centers around a few pages in a reader, pages not always of interest to children, and certainly not of prime concern. When reading grows out of ongoing activities, children regard it as natural and important. There is reading of group and individual stories from charts, the board, and personal papers.

There must be many game-like devices that children use each day to reinforce the early skills. The teachers' manuals are good sources for ideas. When devices and apparatus can be made for children, the manipulative aspect is appealing with its semi-concrete materials, more suitable than vast quantities of worksheets. Here are some suggestions for group, pair and individual activities:

MATCHING

Lotto type ----------	picture to picture, word to word initial letter to picture, word to picture
Pocket holder ----------	as above but in a different format
Flannel board ----------	cut-outs of the main characters to name cards
Sentence strips to group story	(and later phrases, words, individual letter cards to make marked words).
Initial sounds to pictures ----	use a jig-saw type with two fitting pieces, but later have two straight edges to match with a self-checking design underneath.
Sound boxes ----------	shoe boxes with letter pasted on the outside and real things to be put inside to correspond with the initial sound.

GAMES

1) A simple game board with a spinner or dice with only three numbers can be based for several games. Provide markers, discs or small cars for each player (2 or 3). One game could use a pack of word cards, face down. Some squares on the board have X or a coloured dot. When a player lands on one of these, he picks up a word card, reads it, and, if correct, puts it face up to make a second pile, then gets a second turn. If cards are used up before the players get "home", turn the

face-up pile over and use again.

2) FISHING - For a variation of this old favourite, use one colour for the fish with structure words and another colour fish for picture words. Have corresponding coloured charts with the words. When a child "fishes" a word, he matches the word with the one on the chart and says it.

3) FROGS - On a large plain chart draw lily pads and a log on the surface of a pond with paper slips on each to hold words printed in the bodies of frogs. The frogs are drawn from an envelope or box and placed in the picture, as the child says the word and puts it into an oral sentence. Later, the frogs can "jump off" the picture into the storage place.

WORKING WITH WORDS AND LETTERS

1) Making letters - Children may use plasticine, cubes or small lengths of coloured drinking straws to make the letter shapes being learned in phonics, and also build their own names. The model must be clear and beside the child.

Have writing tools on a table - large paper, crayons, felt pens, or space at board. Give attention to direction of letters. Encourage picture writing as well.

2) Making Sentences. - Give the children each word cards for the preprimer vocabulary which they can use to build their own sentences and your dictated ones. It is easy to run off words on manilla tag, large enough for easy handling. Commercial word cards are usually too small and not the vocabulary you need. Children use the collection as a start for a word bank, individually or for a small group.

SPECIAL DAYS

Throughout the term have special days, an "m" day and a "blue" day when you set up a table display with things that have names beginning with m, or that are blue in colour. Encourage children to bring things, plan the day ahead. Try to make it an artistic corner, and one to encourage handling. When Jim brings a blue racing car, write a little note, "Here is Jim's blue racing car" beside it.

Once vocabulary is established, introduce the first preprimer. Take time to let the children examine it and leaf through the pages. Then, use your own discretion over how quickly the group reads it, but do take time to read the pictures. Interpreting the picture encourages telling a story in full sentences, observing the important details and using some imagination in relating what is happening to the actual print. Often, the words represent one person's speech which can come directly from the picture story, e.g. Skip Along in Expressways, page 8... "The little boy asked Pat next door to come and play in his house. She didn't have cars and machines at her place. She took the ambulance to play with and pretended it broke down, so Curt had to bring the tow truck. It was fun", and then tieing the print to the event, the reader could say, "Pat said, 'I like machines!'".

DO NOT HESITATE TO SERVE AS A MODEL BY READING A PICTURE FOR THE GROUP.

You will soon be ready to go on with the next preprimer (or finish the first if it was a lengthy one). If the series is new to you, follow the plans in the manual closely enough to be able to form an opinion about the author's goals and philosophy. After that, work in your own innovations to suit the children and yourself.

When you continue with stories and find yourself introducing new words before each one, don't be so rushed you give up all the activity which made the first set of words have meaning to your group. Be ready to utilize the right teaching moment if something special happens that would make the

teaching of a new word appropriate. Try to present the new nouns with a structure word, not just nest, but a nest, my nest, this nest or a nest in the yard. Sometimes have a topic for "Show and Tell" and write down two or three items after the children speak. If the reader is about to have stories about toys, have favourite toy days. Jot down things like:

Joe likes his red engine.

Sarah said, "My doll rode in a jet."

You might even bring a toy yourself which adds interest to presenting a new word.

In the reading group, when the story has been presented and read once, devise ways of providing repetition by letting children reread in pairs while you move around to listen, or sometimes let individual children reread parts to you alone. To reread such stories within the group where all but the child reading are bored and restless is one quick way to kill the joy of reading.

I have my own preference for keeping the preprimer (or any reader) used for the actual developmental reading work strictly for that time of day. That must not mean depriving the child of reading material. There must be quantities of books for browsing, the children's own booklets, and in the early stages some teacher-made books which use the basic vocabulary. These may be nothing more than two pieces of construction paper taped together, with a picture or two cut from magazines or worn readers, or even simple stick figures drawn to indicate the plot. When the vocabulary consists of only three or four words, there will be a minimum of print!

Remember that no basal reading program recommends using only the basal reader. The child should always be stretching out to other material. As well as dictated experience stories and library books, there should be labelling and reporting that comes from the social studies and science activities

going on in the class. When John brings a stone for the rock collection, beside his contribution could be a strip telling, "Here is John's round stone".

In summary, let me leave these main ideas with you:

a) Choose the preprimer with thought for its content and your class.

b) Spend time on prereading activities as you become acquainted with the class. Recognize the major place good literature holds. Children should hear quantities of prose and poetry.

c) Make your room reflect the enjoyment of reading.

d) Teach the vocabulary of the first preprimer before letting children use the book. Continue to use this period as a sorting out time. Be aware of the series' plans for specific skills and teach the appropriate ones as you direct activities presenting the words.

e) Introduce the first preprimer to only those children who have mastered the vocabulary. Successful book reading will strengthen the child's positive feelings about himself and his ability.

f) Make reading a "natural" part of the whole school day. Try to let it fill a need in the ongoing program. Combine it with writing that goes on as a matter of course activity.

Lets make Western Canada an area where Herbert Kohl's "problem teachers" do not exist. He says,

> "There is no reading problem. There are problem teachers and problem schools. Most people who fail to learn to read in our society are victims of a fiercely competitive system of training that requires failure" (Reading, How to. Penguin, 1973).

If we regard a basal reader as a tool to serve the child when it can benefit him, perhaps our youngsters will love to read, not just in the early years, but after they leave school. Teachers of beginners face a real challenge to make the child's first efforts successful and satisfying. With a little

imagination, and a great deal of hard work, coupled with enthusiasm and a genuine concern over the young child, we can meet that challenge successfully, I know.